# The Three Paths to Happiness

An analysis of the discourse on the mass of suffering.

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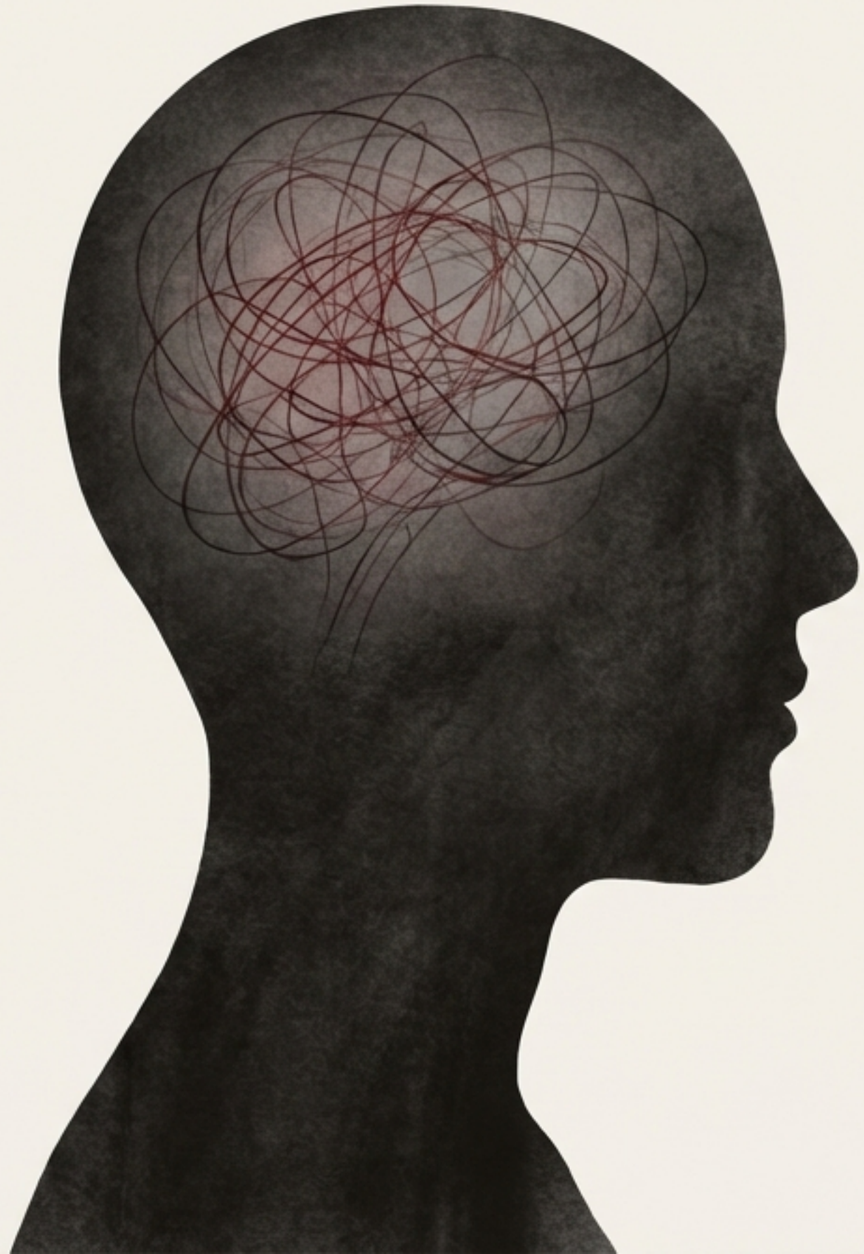

# The Persistent Problem

The presentation begins with a question posed to the Buddha by his follower, Mahānāma the Sakyan:

> *For a long time, sir, I have understood your teaching like this: 'Greed, hate, and delusion are corruptions of the mind.'*
>
> *Despite understanding this, sometimes my mind is occupied by thoughts of greed, hate, and delusion.*
>
> *I wonder what qualities remain in me that I have such thoughts?*

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# The Buddha's Diagnosis: Attachment

> **"Mahānāma, there is a quality that remains in you... For if you had given up that quality you would not still be living at home and enjoying sensual pleasures."**

Core Argument: The Buddha identifies the source of the struggle not as a lack of **understanding**, but as a **continued attachment** to **worldly pleasures**. This **attachment** is the **chain** that **keeps** the **mind tethered** to "unskillful thoughts."

## The Central Premise

Sensual pleasures give little gratification and much suffering and distress, and they are all the more full of drawbacks.

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# An Analysis of Three Strategies

## The Path of Indulgence

Chasing gratification through the five senses.

## The Path of Austerity

Attempting to extinguish suffering through pain and self-mortification.

## The Third Way

Cultivating a higher, more stable bliss that transcends both extremes.

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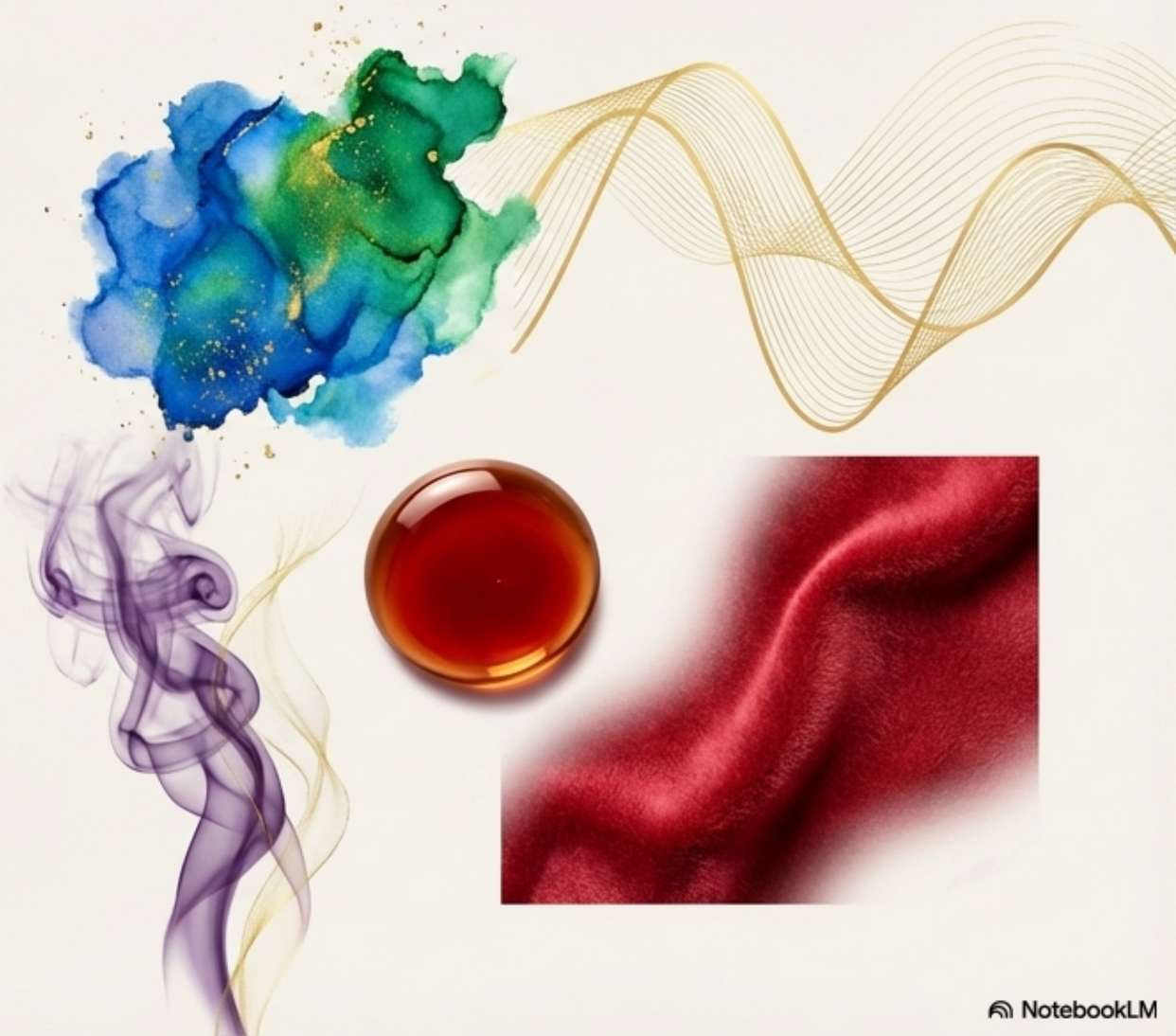
## Path 1: The Path of Indulgence

# The Gratification of the Senses

The Buddha defines the pleasure that arises from the five kinds of sensual stimulation:

- **Sights** known by the eye
- **Sounds** known by the ear
- **Smells** known by the nose
- **Tastes** known by the tongue
- **Touches** known by the body

*"...which are likable, desirable, agreeable, pleasant, sensual, and arousing."*



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# The Drawback: A Mass of Suffering from Toil & Anxiety

The pursuit of pleasure necessitates wealth, which brings its own suffering:

- **The Struggle to Earn:** “They must face cold and heat, being hurt by the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and reptiles, and risking death from hunger and thirst.”
- The Pain of Failure: If they fail, “they sorrow and wail and lament... ‘Oh, my hard work is **wasted**. My efforts are **fruitless**!’”
- The Anxiety of Protection: If they succeed, **they live with the constant fear** of loss: ““How can I prevent my wealth from being taken by rulers or bandits, consumed by fire, swept away by flood, or taken by unloved heirs?’”
- The Grief of Loss: When loss occurs, “they sorrow and wail and lament... ‘What once was mine is **gone**.’”

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# The Drawback: A Mass of Suffering from Conflict & Violence

"For the sake of sensual pleasures," conflict arises at every level of society:

**Societal Conflict:** "Kings fight with kings, aristocrats fight with aristocrats, brahmins fight with brahmins, and householders fight with householders."

**Familial Conflict:** "A mother fights with her child, child with mother, father with child... Brother fights with brother... friend fights with friend."

**Escalation to Violence:** "They attack each other with fists, stones, rods, and swords, resulting in death and deadly pain."

**Organized Warfare:** "They... plunge into a battle massed on both sides, with arrows and spears flying and swords flashing... their heads are chopped off, resulting in death and deadly pain."

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# The Drawback: A Mass of Suffering from Transgression & Consequence

The pursuit of pleasure can lead to extreme actions and dire results:

- Crime: “They break into houses, plunder wealth... commit highway robbery, and commit adultery.”
- Punishment: Rulers subject them to various punishments, including...
- Future Consequence: “Furthermore, for the sake of sensual pleasures, they conduct themselves badly by way of body, speech, and mind. When their body breaks up, after death, they’re reborn in a place of loss, a bad place, the underworld, hell.”

**WHIPPING**
**CANING**
**CUTTING OFF HANDS**
**CUTTING OFF FEET**
**THE PORRIDGE POT**
**THE SHELL-SHAVE**
**RĀHU’S MOUTH**
**GARLAND OF FIRE**
**BURNING HAND**
**BULRUSH TWIST**
**BARK DRESS**
**THE ANTELOPE**
**MEAT HOOK**
**THE COINS**
**CAUSTIC PICKLE**
**TWISTING BAR**
**STRAW MAT**
**SPLASHED WITH HOT OIL**
**FED TO THE HOUNDS**
**IMPALED ALIVE**
**BEHEADED**

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# The Verdict on Path 1: A Profound Imbalance

Little Gratification

A Mass of Suffering

“Before my awakening... so long as I didn’t achieve the rapture and bliss that are apart from sensual pleasures... I didn’t announce that I would not return to sensual pleasures.”

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## Path 2: The Path of Austerity

# To End Suffering Through Suffering

**Context:** The Buddha encounters Jain ascetics who were “constantly standing, turning down seats” and feeling “painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings due to overexertion.”

**Their Stated Philosophy:**
“O Jain ascetics, you have done bad deeds in a past life. Wear them away with these severe and grueling austeries... With the ending of deeds, suffering ends. With the ending of suffering, feeling ends. And with the ending of feeling, all suffering will have been worn away.”

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# An Inquiry into the Foundation

The Buddha begins to question the ascetics on what they actually know.

“But reverends, do you know for sure that that you existed in the past, and it is not the case that you did not exist?”

**No we don’t, reverend.**

“But reverends, do you know for sure that you did bad deeds in the past?”

**No we don’t, reverend.**

“But reverends, do you know that you did such and such bad deeds?”

**No we don’t, reverend.**

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# An Unknowable Process, An Unknowable Goal

The questioning continues, exposing the lack of verifiable knowledge:

“But reverends, do you know that so much suffering has already been worn away? Or that so much suffering still remains to be worn away? Or that when so much suffering is worn away all suffering will have been worn away?”

**No we don’t, reverend.**

“But reverends, do you know about giving up unskillful qualities in this very life and embracing skillful qualities?”

**No we don’t, reverend.**

**Conclusion: “So it seems that you don’t know any of these things.”**

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# The Ascetics' Challenge

**The Jains' Assertion:**

"Reverend Gotama, pleasure is not gained through pleasure; pleasure is gained through pain."

**The Proposed Proof:**

"For if pleasure were to be gained through pleasure, King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha would gain pleasure, since he lives in greater pleasure than Venerable Gotama."

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# A Test of True Happiness

**The Reframed Question**
The Buddha corrects their rash statement and agrees to the comparison. “Now we ask Venerable Gotama: “Who lives in greater pleasure, King Bimbisāra or Venerable Gotama?””

**The Buddha’s Test**
“What do you think, reverends? Is King Bimbisāra capable of experiencing perfect happiness for seven days and nights without moving his body or speaking?”

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# The Unassailable Proof

## The King's Capacity

**NO**

Is the King capable of perfect happiness for 7 days?

No he is not, reverend.

For 1 day?

No he is not, reverend.

## The Buddha's Capacity

**YES**

But I am capable of experiencing perfect happiness for one day and night...

...two days... three days... up to seven days.

## This being so, who lives in greater pleasure, King Bimbisāra or I?

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# The Third Way: A Transcendent Bliss

## The Definition

This superior happiness is “the rapture and bliss that are apart from sensual pleasures and unskillful qualities, or something even more peaceful than that.”

## The Verdict

The Jains themselves provide the conclusion:

**“This being so, Venerable Gotama lives in greater pleasure than King Bimbisāra.”**

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